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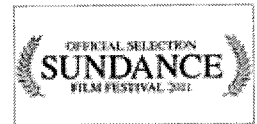
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# The Politicized Mind

By DAVID BROOKS

Before he allegedly went off on his shooting rampage in Tucson, Jared Loughner listed some of his favorite books on his YouTube page. These included: "Animal Farm," "Brave New World," "Alice in Wonderland," "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," "Through the Looking Glass" and "The Communist Manifesto." Many of these books share a common theme: individuals trying to control their own thoughts and government or some other force trying to take that control away.

Loughner also made a series of videos. These, too, suggest that he was struggling to control his own mind. Just before his killing spree, Loughner made one called "My Final Thoughts." In it he writes about different levels of consciousness and dreaming. He tries to build a rigid structure to organize his thinking. He uses the word "currency" as a metaphor for an inner language to make sense of the world.

"You create and distribute your new currency, listener?" the video asks. "You don't allow the government to control your grammar structure, listener?"

All of this evidence, which is easily accessible on the Internet, points to the possibility that Loughner may be suffering from a mental illness like schizophrenia. The vast majority of schizophrenics are not violent, and those that receive treatment are not violent. But as Dr. E. Fuller Torrey, a research psychiatrist, writes in his book, "The Sanity Offense," about 1 percent of the seriously mentally ill (or about 40,000 individuals) are violent. They account for about half the rampage murders in the United States.

Other themes from Loughner's life fit the rampage-killer profile. He saw himself in world historical terms. He appeared to have a poor sense of his own illness (part of a condition known as anosognosia). He had increasingly frequent run-ins with the police. In short, the evidence before us suggests that Loughner was locked in a world far removed from politics as we normally understand it.

Yet the early coverage and commentary of the Tucson massacre suppressed this evidence. The coverage and commentary shifted to an entirely different explanation: Loughner unleashed his rampage because he was incited by the violent rhetoric of the Tea Party, the anti-immigrant movement and Sarah Palin.

Mainstream news organizations linked the attack to an offensive target map issued by Sarah Palin's political action committee. The Huffington Post erupted, with former Senator Gary Hart flatly stating that the killings were the result of angry political rhetoric. Keith Olbermann demanded a Palin repudiation and the founder of the Daily Kos wrote on Twitter: "Mission Accomplished, Sarah Palin." Others argued that the killing was fostered by a political climate of hate.

These accusations — that political actors contributed to the murder of 6 people, including a 9-year-old girl — are extremely grave. They were made despite the fact that there was, and is, no evidence that Loughner was part of these movements or a consumer of their literature. They were made despite the fact that the link between political rhetoric and actual violence is extremely murky. They were vicious charges made by people who claimed to be criticizing viciousness.

Yet such is the state of things. We have a news media that is psychologically ill informed but politically inflamed, so it naturally leans toward political explanations. We have a news media with a strong distaste for Sarah Palin and the Tea Party movement, and this seemed like a golden opportunity to tarnish them. We have a segmented news media, so there is nobody in most newsrooms to stand apart from the prevailing assumptions. We have a news media market in which the rewards go to anybody who can stroke the audience's pleasure buttons.

I have no love for Sarah Palin, and I like to think I'm committed to civil discourse. But the political opportunism occasioned by this tragedy has ranged from the completely irrelevant to the shamelessly irresponsible.

The good news is that there were a few skeptics, even during the height of the mania: Howard Kurtz of The Daily Beast, James Fallows of The Atlantic and Jonathan Chait of The New Republic. The other good news is that the mainstream media usually recovers from its hysterias and tries belatedly to get the story right.

If the evidence continues as it has, the obvious questions are these: How can we more aggressively treat mentally ill people who are becoming increasingly disruptive? How can we prevent them from getting guns? Do we need to make involuntary treatment easier for authorities to invoke?

Torrey's book describes a nation that has been unable to come up with a humane mental health policy — one that protects the ill from their own demons and society from their rare but deadly outbursts. The other problem is this: contemporary punditry lives in the world of superficial tactics and interests. It is unprepared when an event opens the door to a deeper realm of disorder, cruelty and horror.